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SUBJECT: LEBANON: MINISTER DECRIES OPPOSITION COUP
ATTEMPT, EUROPEAN ENGAGEMENT WITH SYRIA

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason: Section 1.4 (d)
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SUMMARY

1. (S) According to Minister Nayla Mouawad, March 14 leaders feared an opposition coup d'etat, possibly with military connivance, during the week of the January 25 Paris III donor conference. Opposition leaders' statements and actions during the January 23 demonstrations appeared to bear out the coup scenario March 14 had feared, but swift action by Samir Geagea, Walid Jumblatt and Prime Minister Siniora to counter the opposition's street action saved the government. As both sides of Lebanon's political dispute mobilize for potential street action, a split in the Lebanese Armed Forces remains a real and disturbing possibility. Meanwhile at the Paris III conference, Siniora was snubbed by President Chirac and, as usual, by Chirac's friend and backer Nazek Hariri, who seeks the premiership for her stepson Saad. Chirac and Nazek Hariri appeared to anoint Riad Salameh as their choice for Lebanon's next president. Finally, Mouawad's conversations with key French and European leaders made it clear that March 14 leaders have a lot of work to do to keep Europe engaged on behalf of Lebanese independence. End Summary.

COUP D'ETAT MANQUE

2. (S) The Ambassador and Polchief lunched with Minister of Social Affairs Nayla Mouawad February 2 to discuss the events of the previous week in Lebanon and Paris. During the week leading up to the Paris III donor conference, Mouawad told us, March 14 leaders were expecting an opposition coup d'etat. The scenario they feared was that Hizballah might make an arrangement with LAF Commander Michel Sleiman by which Hizballah operatives would raid the Serail and turn Prime Minister Siniora out, then propose Michel Aoun as interim head of government until the holding of new parliamentary, and then presidential, elections. In the face of the inevitable March 14 objections to Aoun, Hizballah would then feign compromise by double-crossing Aoun and installing Sleiman as a "compromise" head of government.

3. (S) Minister Mouawad's son Michel, who had played a role in thwarting Suleiman Franjeh's attempt to close roads around his mother's Zgharta electoral district, joined the lunch briefly and elaborated on the analysis. Preparing the ground for the coup attempt was Hizballah Secretary-General

Hassan Nasrallah's speech on Sunday, January 21 in which he warned that the use of the LAF against the opposition would result in the splitting of the army along confessional lines.

Nasrallah's speech was no mere warning to Sleiman though, Michel said, noting that Nasrallah has private communication channels to Sleiman and that he need not communicate through the media. Rather, Nasrallah's statement was meant to absolve Sleiman, in advance, for failing to use the army to stop the demonstrations that were coming on Tuesday, January 23.

14. (S) Michel continued that Hizballah and Aoun representatives met that morning in a symbolic position near the old Green Line and announced they were launching an "intifada" against the government. When Sleiman's forces stood on the sidelines that day as opposition demonstrators closed key traffic arteries in and around Beirut, it appeared the coup scenario might be unfolding. Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea threatened to open the roads by force, and Suleiman Franjieh then made a telling remark that evening by way of an answer. In a televised interview, he said in effect that, "if the opposition fails today, it will have been because Michel Aoun failed to frustrate Geagea's efforts to open the opposition roadblocks."

15. (S) In the end Aoun pulled his demonstrators out before they clashed with Geagea, a move he would later explain having undertaken not out of fear but to spare Lebanon violence. Geagea also threatened Franjieh, according to Michel, and Franjieh retreated to his Zgharta stronghold. The coup attempt was over.

16. (S) Nevertheless the episode mobilized and radicalized

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March 14 leaders. Minister Mouawad told us that Jumblatt entered a cabinet meeting that evening, a meeting at which the Army's top security chiefs were present, in a highly agitated state. After casting about the room for solutions, Jumblatt stormed out with the announcement he would force open roads with his own fighters that night, begin rearming his gunmen immediately, and in the event of any recurrence of violence send a message to his followers that he is surrounded in his Clemenceau residence and requires their armed assistance. (Note: According to one of his MPs, Jumblatt has decided to remain mostly in his Beirut home for the duration of the political crisis and is ready at any time to issue a call for help which, he believes, will bring his armed supporters to resolve any situation necessary. We are reporting this conversation septel. End Note.) The Prime Minister was also decisive that day, Mouawad reported. Siniora called Grand Mufti Mohammed Qabbani and provided him with talking points for a resolute statement rejecting the opposition's attempt to hold Beirut hostage.

ARMY READINESS

17. (S) LAF Commander Sleiman may or may not have conspired with the opposition, but in the end his decision after the army failed to intervene was to offer his resignation to Minister of Defense Elias Murr. (Murr refused the resignation, perhaps because Sleiman's acting replacement would be Chief of Staff Shawki al-Masri, a strong Jumblatt ally and thus a polarizing figure.) According to Michel Mouawad, March 14 leaders believe that if, as Hassan Nasrallah had warned, the LAF were to split in a confrontation with the opposition, the split might favor March 8. The opposition has two generals, he explained -- Aoun and President Lahoud -- and March 14 features Samir Geagea, loathed for his killings of LAF soldiers and officers during the Civil War.

18. (S) March 14's strategy committee decided to recommend using more Internal Security Forces (ISF) units to relieve the overburdened LAF, Michel informed us. The army would

retain the principal responsibility to patrol areas with a complex confessional makeup, including Beirut, but the ISF would relieve army units in areas like the Metn, Batroun, Kisba, and the Zgharta electoral district of Minister Mouawad, also home to her adversary Suleiman Franjieh.

¶9. (C) The Ambassador asked whether, now that the Paris III conference is behind us, there is a de facto truce between March 8 and March 14 until the February 14 commemoration of Rafiq Hariri's assassination. Minister Mouawad did not confirm this but responded that it remains a necessity to get the opposition demonstrators out of central Beirut.

PARIS III -- ATMOSPHERE AND INTRIGUE

¶10. (C) Mouawad praised President Chirac's coordination of Paris III, commenting that he circulated among the donors to pin down details of their contributions "like a carpetseller." Like many Lebanese observers, Mouawad read Chirac's behavior at the conference as a clear reflection of the French President's political preferences in Lebanon. Chirac, who has never granted a one-on-one meeting with Prime Minister Siniora, continued to snub Siniora in the conference. The following Saturday, he omitted Siniora from the list of invitees to the ceremony in which he awarded the Legion d'Honneur to Telecommunications Minister Marwan Hamadeh. Though Siniora had by that time already left Paris to rush back to Beirut following Thursday's street violence, no courtesy invitation was extended, and the omission was remarked upon by the Lebanese delegation. Chirac also upset would-be Siniora rival, Public Works Minister Mohammad Safadi, by seating him for dinner in a position inferior to that of Chirac's interpreter, according to Mouawad.

¶11. (C) Mouawad told us that Chirac's stance vis-a-vis Siniora was motivated by longtime friend and financial backer, and Rafiq Hariri widow, Nazek Hariri. Hariri did some snubbing of her own at the conference. Nazek has been particularly spiteful of Siniora's wife Houda, in particular after the latter's well-received 2006 photo op with FLOTUS

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(and presumably after similar meetings with Cherie Blair and others), and pointedly left Houda out of a dinner she hosted. (Houda, aware of this in advance, wisely stayed out of Paris.) Nazek had wanted to assume Rafiq Hariri's leadership of Lebanon after his assassination, Mouawad speculated. Nazek even claimed the Paris III conference was her idea, Mouawad added. Nazek now hopes to engineer her stepson Saad's rapid elevation to the premiership. That the post is occupied by Siniora, who owes his career to Rafiq Hariri, is particularly galling to her.

¶12. (C) In contrast, Nazek invited Salameh to address pro-Hariri Mustaqbal TV from her Paris apartment, surrounded by poster-size images of the martyred Rafiq Hariri, an endorsement that was not lost on the Lebanese television audience. Chirac had showered Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh with public praise during the day's conference, which seemed to add a French endorsement to his presidential ambitions. Perhaps in anticipation of this public embrace of Salameh, Siniora had refused Chirac's insistence that Salameh, not Siniora, be the opening Lebanese speaker at the conference, according to Mouawad. Marwan Hamadeh had apparently been charged with the delicate negotiations to get Siniora accepted back at the podium.

¶13. (C) In conversations with USG officials at the conference, Mouawad told us, she praised our aid efforts and solicited more resources for her charitable foundation. Mouawad also insisted that Israeli withdrawal from the Shebaa Farms be emphasized by Lebanon's friends in the international community, in particular as such a withdrawal would rob Hizballah of much of its legitimacy. Mouawad does not believe, as Michel Aoun and some March 14 figures maintain,

that the return of Shebaa Farms would result in Hizballah's rapid disarmament. However, resolution of the Farms issue is one of the Seven Points which provided the formula for the cessation of hostilities that ended the Israeli-Hizballah War, and the entire plan loses credibility if one of the Points is dropped.

¶14. (C) Mouawad had a long discussion with Michel Barnier, former French Foreign Minister and a political advisor to French presidential candidate Nicolas Sarkozy (whom Mouawad believes would be much more favorable to Lebanon's interests as president than Segolene Royal). Barnier, an old friend of Mouawad's who knows Lebanon well from long years spent on the board of St. Joseph College, cautioned that a President Sarkozy might adopt a European orientation over the kind of internationalism that would favor Lebanon. Sarkozy is also close to Israel, Mouawad averred, and Barnier is currently visiting Saudi Arabia to soothe Saudi concerns over their perception of an excessive tilt toward Israel.

¶15. (C) Two of Mouawad's other interlocutors in Paris made it clear that Lebanon has a lot of work to do to line up European support in the critical months ahead. Benita Ferrero-Waldner, EU External Affairs Commissioner, told Mouawad that apart from Chirac's France, most of Europe is heading in the direction of increased engagement with Syria and Iran. The USG decision to isolate those regimes was a mistake, the Commissioner said. Mouawad responded that confronting those countries' aggressive policies is crucial to the security of the democratic world, of which Lebanon is the frontier.

¶16. (C) Maurice Gourdault-Montagne, Chirac's Diplomatic Advisor, was more supportive. He recommended to Mouawad to return to Europe and seek meetings with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and other female political leaders. With Mouawad's credibility both as the widow of Rene Mouawad and as one of the few high female officials in the Arab world, she can make a convincing case that Syria's designs on Lebanon need to be checked, not accommodated.
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